16:Messenger E-4,5 (1955-1966) 1969 ER6 Rural Irish ER6
(1959-1960) Inis Beag

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Figure 3. Church of the patron saint and the cemetery

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on the island during the early part of the sixth century. A low wall with two openings has been constructed about the spring, and it is visited frequently by those wishing to obtain water or to pray. I was told by the owners of surrounding fields that when they were children many gallery grave tombs stood in the area, but most of these were removed when the fields first were improved and seeded. Most islanders will not molest prehistoric and medieval monuments, especially those that they believe are burial places, out of reverence for the dead or fear of the ghosts or fairies who reside within them; but down the centuries, such structures gradually have disappeared by being torn down to satisfy building and farming needs. It is the emphatic claim of the folk that the sacred well was created miraculously by the visiting saint and has never dried up, but two unbiased observers reported to me that they had seen it waterless during especially dry summers.

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At least twice during the Middle Ages Inis Beag was laid waste by invading forces: first by Vikings in 1081 (and maybe on other occasions between the ninth and eleventh centuries, when much of Ireland came under the control of Norwegians and Danes), and then in 1334 by Sir John Darcy, the Lord Justice of Ireland, who with a large fleet and army sailed around the Irish coast implementing British rule. The islanders believe that Inis Beag was completely depopulated by the Vikings and possibly by the Darcy expedition, and again by wars once, and maybe twice, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Modern Period (1500 to 1900)

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The castle in Inis Beag built within the Celtic promontory fort, probably erected in the sixteenth century by the mainland family who owned the island,

16:Messenger E-4,5 (1955-1966) 1969 ER6 Rural Irish ER6
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is a three-story tower house with its south and west walls partially destroyed. The middle story of the castle rests on vaults, and there are carved corbels projecting from the north and east walls. It is believed that the castle was assaulted in 1652 from the land side by Cromwellian troops, who disembarked at the back of the island and hauled their heavy cannons across the limestone pavement, unimpeded by the stone fences which stand today, to the monastery above the tower.

Queen Elizabeth annexed Inis Beag for the Crown in 1586 because of its strategic position, after two contending Irish families had appealed to her following their fierce battle for its possession, in which all of the folk may have been slaughtered. From 1586 until the first decade of the eighteenth century, Commonwealth, Loyalist, and Williamite forces were stationed in Inis Beag most of the time, and until 1886, when obtained by the Irish Land Commission, the island was owned by a succession of absentee Anglo-Irish landlords. When Cromwellian troops forced the surrender of Loyalists in 1652, the population of Inis Beag once again may have been decimated, although one legend holds that only males were put to the sword. The island after 1655 became a port for transshipment of clerics who were exiled to the West Indies. This was the time when Cromwell revenged himself on Irish Catholics and their Protestant allies by appropriating for his followers more than half of the Irish soil and leveling harsh political, commercial, and religious penalties. Thousands of priests were banished, including all of the bishops for a time, in his crusade.

It was after the Restoration in 1660 that the land of Inis Beag was divided into quarters, half-quarters, and smaller units and assigned to families. My genealogical research reveals that all of the families of Inis Beag trace descent from immigrants who arrived in the island during and after the last half of the seventeenth century. The early arrivals, as well as any survivors, may have intermarried and interbred with soldiers posted in the island, for anthropometric and blood group analyses (buttressed by surname and historical evidence and local legend) show that the folk more closely resemble the northern English than they do their mainland cousins. A Dublin humor magazine featured a cartoon, not favored in nativistic quarters, showing Inis Beag men in traditional attire playing cricket.

The islanders still express considerable bitterness over the conditions of poverty and servitude experienced by their ancestors during the 300 years that they lived under alien landlords. All of the excesses of foreign domination suffered by mainland peasants were suffered by Inis Beag folk, but were aggravated by the ordinary hardships of island living. Little is known of local events in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, until the island was "rediscovered" by Petrie and O'Flaherty. There was trading between Inis Beag and communities along the mainland coast for many miles, and ships passing by often dropped anchor at the island; but at that time this region of Ireland was very much isolated and seldom visited. A military garrison once again was established in Inis Beag for a brief period during the Napoleonic Wars, when the English feared an invasion of the British Isles from the west by French forces. A watch tower was constructed on the island, one of a chain along the Atlantic coast of Ireland, to give early warning of invasion.

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175 The castle and watch tower still dominate the Inis Beag skyline, and the latter
[712] serves as a landmark for fishermen posting their nets. Another landmark, at the
[648] southeast tip of the island, is a 110-feet-high lighthouse built during the 1850s.

176 Written sources and local traditions disagree as to the effects of the great
173 famine on Inis Beag. Some observers claim that the potato blight completely de-
731 stroyed island crops, and the folk were forced to depend on secondary agricultural
244 commodities, livestock, fish, and limpets in order to survive; conversely, others maintain that the blight did not penetrate the island until much later. According to my Inis Beag respondents, the blight did contaminate some gardens, but enough
[451] were spared so that the islanders were not greatly inconvenienced. In fact, potatoes
[161] were exported by some farmers to help feed starving mainlanders. Between 1841 and 1851, the population of Inis Beag increased by 62 persons, at a time when
[167] most other Irish communities had dwindling populations. The first record of substantial emigration from the island, mostly to the United States, was in 1822.

Contemporary Setting

131 Inis Beag has a northeast to southwest topographical axis, at right angles to its geological axis, and is a mile and three-quarters in length and a quarter of a
[161] mile less in width. A population of 350 persons inhabits four villages, and the
[361] island comprises 1440 acres. When giving directions informally, the folk refer to
[823] the beach side as the north side and the back of the island bordering the Atlantic as the south side; then, the sound separating Inis Beag from Inis Thiar becomes the west side, and the sound between Inis Beag and the mainland the east side. I will follow this practice when describing various geographical and other features
133 in this chapter. Between the mainland and Inis Beag, a reef extending from the island far out into the east sound is a menace to shipping; it was on this reef within 200 yards of the shore that the freighter ran aground in 1960.

133 A large beach and a contiguous stretch of common land, which together
311 make up over 200 of the island's 1440 acres, dominate the north side of Inis Beag. The beach is known as the "strand," following English usage, and lies west and north of the common land, about midway between the sounds (see Figs. 4, 9, and 10). It is thought that several hundred years ago arable land existed where the common land does today, and the strand was very narrow; but gradually sand accumulated, widening the beach and burying more and more farm land as it crept eastward. If one examines the Ordnance Survey Maps of 1841 and 1902, the slow encroachment of the sand can be noted. The common land was about half its present size in 1841, and 60 years later almost 70 acres of cultivable soil had been engulfed. The tops of fences projecting above the surface at the present time attest to the shifting of the sand, as does the buried church of the patron saint, and sand now threatens fertile plots on the east side of the island.

[361] There are six major and several minor terraces in Inis Beag, of which the lower two underlie the strand, the common land, and two of the four villages. The lower terraces are broad and the upper ones narrow and precipitous, while weather-